

# Interview of Carol Peterson—September 21, 2010

*Transcribed by Russ Sherwin, October 12, Prescott, Arizona*

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- Interviewer: Mark Junge
- Interview date: 9/21/2010
- Place of interview: Cokeville, Wyoming
- Topic of interview: 1986 Cokeville Elementary School bombing
- Source recording: CD from Sue Castaneda, Wyoming State Archives, Department of Parks and Cultural Resources



*Transcriber's notes: In most cases I have deleted redundant ands, ers, uhs, buts, false starts, etc. If I deleted an entire phrase, I have inserted ellipses ... Where you find brackets [ ] I have added words for explanation or to complete an awkward sentence. Parentheses ( ) are used for incidental non-verbal sounds, like laughter, or comments by others in the room. Words emphasized by the speaker are italicized.*

## Introduction by Sue Castaneda

*This oral history collection is entitled “Survivor is my Name” and features remembrances of the Cokeville, Wyoming Elementary School bombing of May 16, 1986<sup>1</sup>. It is produced for the Wyoming State Archives by Sue Castaneda. The interviewer is Wyoming Historian, Mark Junge. The entire project is funded by the Wyoming Cultural Trust Fund. No part of this audio recording or transcript may be reproduced in full or in part without written permission of the Wyoming State Archives. Here now is Carol Peterson who was then a second grade teacher.*

## Interview Begins:

Mark Junge: Today is the 21<sup>st</sup> of September, 2010, my name is Mark Junge, and I’m here at the house of Carol and Robert Peterson here in Cokeville. Sue Castaneda, the director of this Wyoming history project is opposite me and to my left is Carol, and she is going to tell us a little about her experience on May 16, 1986.

Carol Peterson: My name is Carol Peterson and I was teaching second grade when this incident happened. We’d been down to the park for a teddy bear picnic, and we’d come up from lunch down at the park. We were in our classrooms. Some of the children had assignments on their desks. I took a group of children to the back of the room and we were reading. A lady walked in the door, she didn’t knock, she just walked right in the door. My first impression is, “What is she doing here?” She’s not very well kept, and at just a quick glance, I just thought she didn’t look like an educator. So I kind of questioned her right from the start. And then she said, “Bring your children in classroom such and such and come immediately.” And my first impression was, “Why should I do what you say?” Then in a very demanding voice she said, “Bring your children and come immediately!” I thought, well maybe this is a civil defense—you know, something we’re doing for that.

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<sup>1</sup> The **Cokeville Elementary School hostage crisis** occurred on May 16, 1986, at Cokeville, Wyoming, United States, when former town marshal David Young, and his wife Doris Young, took 167 children and adults hostage at **Cokeville Elementary School**. After a two-and-a-half hour standoff, a gasoline bomb the couple was carrying went off prematurely, injuring Doris Young while David Young was out of the room. Returning to the scene, David Young shot his wife, then himself. All the hostages escaped, though 79 were hospitalized with burns and injuries. *Wikipedia*

I lined my children up—I think I had twenty-four students—can't quite remember, it's been a long time—and I lined them up and we followed her down into the room right next to mine. When we walked into the room, there was this terrible smell of gas, and I saw guns lined up along the chalk board. I walked to the back of the room and as I got to the back of the room our fifth grade teacher was saying to the man, "You don't want to do this!" And he [David Young] took his gun and pointed it at him and said, "You back up or I'll shoot!" And I thought, "Whoa! What is this?! I don't think this is any civil defense exercise."

Some of the children were crying. The room was full. I don't remember what order I was brought into the room. I saw a strange looking man, and he had a grocery cart. It had two gallon bottles at the top of it and had some boxes—I don't recall all that was on the cart. I noticed that he had a cord wrapped around his wrist. The detonator was a clothespin, I noticed that. Another piece of a clothespin was in it, and there was a screw here and here and I assumed all he had to do was pull that out—

Mark Junge: And the screws would make contact?

Carol Peterson: Mm-hm. I remember looking at him, and he had kind of a scruffy beard and deep set eyes. I felt very frightened of him. I thought, I want to avoid this man. So I walked to the back, and here all my little children followed me! I don't think he realized the energy that would be in the room with all those children.

But anyway, he told us he was a revolutionist. He was not happy with what was going on in the Government. He passed us a paper out. It didn't make a whole lot of sense. It talked about infinity, plus infinity, and then he went on and talked quite a bit about what he represented.

Mark Junge: Could you describe him a little bit more? What did he look like? You said he looked scruffy, I mean, how he was dressed, how he appeared?

Carol Peterson: He was tall and he had a pair of jeans on. The reason I noticed—later I went up and I sat on the floor because I had two little sick—well, one little girl was throwing up because she was so frightened, and the other one had been sick all day, and I'd

never been able to contact her mother. So she laid on my lap, and I sat on the floor so she could lie on my lap.

I remember seeing his pants frayed and noticed that he had several guns on his body. He had a windbreaker and a while later he took his windbreaker off. As I recall, his shirt was plaid, but I could be—like I say, it's been too many years. I remember when he started telling that he was a revolutionist—that he was there to be there as long as he needed to, to keep us as long—and I remember my heart just started pounding. I'd never had it pound like that.

After he finished talking, he looked at me, and I looked around to see if it was really me he was looking at, hoping it wasn't, and he motioned for me to come up to the front of the room. I immediately thought, "There's those guns, maybe I'll be the first one that he'll show an example of."

I walked to the front of the room, and of course all my little children followed me. It wasn't just me that went up there. All the little children in my class followed me, and I went up, and I'm not sure to this day why he called me to the front of the room. He said, he told the children, "These .22s are for you children. If you do what I say you won't get hurt."

He pointed to the rifles and he said, "These are for your teachers. Your lives don't mean one thing to me." That was his comment. So I sat down and there was degrees of fear with the children. Some of them went and played Legos and showed me the planes, and some just clung to me the whole time. One little girl started throwing up, so I asked him if I could take her into the bathroom, and he wouldn't let me leave the room, so I had to use the wastepaper basket.

If you can imagine, there was this smell, and the smell of gas, and it was a warm spring day, and it was really nauseating. I didn't have the faith that those children had. I just didn't think I was going to get out of there alive. I really thought, this is going to be the end. I didn't do much talking to him. The first grade teacher did a lot of negotiating with him. "Can we move some of this furniture?" We were crowded.

So we took a lot of furniture out. We were able to bring the TV in. He said, “Don’t be gone longer than five minutes, or else.” I remember the principal coming to the window. We had these little long windows and he looked in, and I tried to motion to him to get out, but he came back from lunch and he couldn’t find his secretary, and couldn’t find any children in the classrooms. So he came in, and he tried to negotiate with the man to tell him, “Just take me.” No, he wasn’t going to do that. He said, “Just let the children go and take me.” Of course, he didn’t want that.

Oh—when he was talking to us at the beginning too, he was demanding two million dollars for each child. And then he asked each teacher how many students we had. He was calculating. I think he was probably a very bright man, according to some of the journals that they found, and some of his transcripts, you know, from the universities.

Anyway, we sat on the floor and a week prior, we’d had news. We always had news. I wanted the children to be aware that there were places beyond Cokeville! And so we had news, and we were talking about Khadafy. That’s when he was in the news a lot, and we’d talked about how he ruled with guns and fear, and he was just a tyrant, and I talked to the children—oh, I asked them previously to write why I love living in America. They didn’t know why they loved living in America. So I had the opportunity to teach them, while we were on the floor there, to say, “Now, do you see guns up there along the chalkboard?” “Yeah.” “Can we leave this room?” “No.” “Why can’t we?” Well, we talked about—because he was holding us hostage. That he was the ruler now. And one of the kids said, “Well, can we go home when the bell rings?”

That was my nightmare, trying to comfort and trying to tell them that everything was going to be okay, but yet I wasn’t sure it was going to be okay. I didn’t know whether to say that it would be okay, because I didn’t know it was going to. So we had a wonderful conversation about what it means to be free, and after this whole thing was over I had them write again why I love living in America. We had

amazing—I wish I'd of kept them! I sent them all home, and I thought, oh why didn't I keep copies of them? They were amazing!

So anyway, we talked, and I took care of the two little sick ones, and I felt like I was going to be paralyzed because my legs were getting numb with these two little people and kids hanging on to me, and one time I did look up into the room, and I saw a group of children kneeling and they were taking turns praying. I think one of the leaders was a sixth grade boy, and I remember him coming over to me and he was saying, "We're going to be okay."

I sure hoped so! Because I wasn't that positive! But he was really positive. But there were many degrees of fear. I think we were all just so busy taking care of our own children we didn't—you know, it was just like it was another world where I was.

And then, he [David Young] had to go to the bathroom, and it had this little tiny toilet that's just about this big. My sister-in-law said to him—how interesting!

"You'll just die when you go in there." You know, talking about when you see how tiny the toilet is. And his wife took the detonator.

Mark Junge: What did Doris look like? Can you describe her?

Carol Peterson: She was about medium built, dark hair, she was a little overweight, not—but she was quite a pleasant lady. She said—it made me really angry when she said this—she said, "If you do what we tell you, you won't get hurt. Just think, you can write this in your journals!" And I thought, "You witch!!" I was so—I was just overwhelmed with her making it such a light thing!

They told you about the masking square? We could tell that he was becoming very nervous. As I sat there and watched him, I could feel he was becoming agitated. He had just big rings of perspiration. I was frightened and felt that we needed to do something to try to calm down or to be careful, because he was so agitated. So we decided to take some masking tape, and we taped—I think it was an eight foot square in the middle of the room, right here, and he pushed the cart, the homemade bomb into this, and we told the children this was the magic square. Don't go past this

square. Some of the children just sat right all around and just watched him. And I'm sure that that made him very nervous.

Mark Junge: So he wasn't backed up against the wall, he was in the center?

Carol Peterson: No, he was up here. When I came into the room, he was about right here when he was confronting the fifth grade teacher, then he moved up here. And he didn't do much talking at all. His wife did most of the talking. He would tell her something, and then she would tell us.

He went into the bathroom, and so she took the detonator and she wrapped his—I remember her wrapping his windbreaker around her wrist, I think probably to remind her that she had it, because it didn't have a very long cord. I think she turned, she said something about, "Oh, I've got a headache!" Or something, forgetting that the detonator was on her arm.

And of course it blew up, and the room just filled with black smoke, and yet there were flames all over, and I thought, "Gosh! I'm not dead! Maybe I can get out of here!" She was more back here. I could see this body that was just kind of leaning over just a little bit and just, you know, on fire. Flames coming from her body. I think she took a lot of the concussion from the bomb.

My sister-in-law teaches first grade and she was back here, and so I was afraid that maybe it was her or one of our bigger students. So I stopped to try—and the fourth grade teacher says, "Get out! Get out! Get out!" so I did just what I was supposed to do.

But I couldn't see—the density of the smoke was so dark, I couldn't see beyond here. I could feel—I think I probably stood up and dropped my two little girls on the floor. I don't remember a lot of that. I remember Mr. Mitchell saying, "Get out of here! Get going!" and I said, "I don't know where my children are." And he said, "Get out! Get out!" and I tried to touch or feel any little body that I could. I fell over the guns and I ran down to the south end of the hall and was able to get out that way.

Mark Junge: So what happened after he went to the bathroom? Then the detonation took place?

Carol Peterson: Yes, and then he came back out, but we, of course, were all out. He came back out. We were all questioned as to what happened. He shot—‘course he came out one time while some of the teachers were going through this little room that connected to my room. We were in this classroom and then there was a little hallway and a bathroom, and he’d gone into that bathroom. And then my classroom was right here, and so some of them were going out that way. I went out the door, and they went out the door that connected the classrooms.

He came out, and the music teacher was going through, and he says he remembers looking back and saw some light, and he had a .22 and a .45 in his hand, and he shot both of [the guns], and only the .22 went off and hit him in the shoulder, went up over his spine and hit him in his other shoulder.

Mark Junge: This was the teacher he hit?

Carol Peterson: The music teacher. And he ran out—my husband says he came out to where he was and he said, “I think I’ve been shot,” and he dropped down to the floor.

But then he [David Young] came out, and he shot the music teacher, and then he went back into the bathroom. And when I was running out I could hear popping. I could hear like bullets going off. And he came out and shot her.

So I was questioned. They had a string in the ceiling and they had it at the slant that the bullet must have gone into the ceiling. So they thought that he must have shot from the floor, you know, was crawling on his hands and knees. Some of them think it was a mercy killing and some of ‘em think it was anger. He was angry because his plan hadn’t worked. But she had a hole in the back of her head, and her hair was just black and just fringed when they took her out the window.

I was already out on the lawn. There was one little boy that was out there. I couldn’t believe it! I couldn’t see any children. And he was just screaming! I think he was in



kindergarten. He was just screaming. I just put my arms around him and he just screamed out more. And I looked at him, and he just had flesh hanging from his little arm. He was the only one that was out there. I didn't realize that all of the other children had run out down the street and were on the main street. There was no one around, except I could see men in camouflage outfits coming toward the school, just kind of converging on it. You know, it was just kind of like an out of body experience. You just don't experience these kinds of things.

Mark Junge: Oh, they were a SWAT team?

Carol Peterson: A SWAT team, yes. And they were just coming from all directions, and they had their guns and were headed toward the school, the south end of the school.

Mark Junge: And they didn't know that David was already gone?

Carol Peterson: No. I think because of the heat, there were still—I don't know whether there were still shots going off or what.

Mark Junge: Yeah, the ammunition that was in there was sporadically going off.

Carol Peterson: That's what I think I could hear.

Mark Junge: So then, you were out of the building—your kids were—was your first concern then to get the kids together?

Carol Peterson: Yes! And they were not there! It was just pandemonium. I went out onto the main street. My husband had had a horse accident and he'd broken his leg, so he was home, and he came to meet me as I got out of the school. I said, "I've got to find my children." And they were just all over, and ambulances and people, and I was just frantic 'cause I couldn't find my children. We'd had a lot of exercises where if we had an emergency, where we should meet, but they were so frightened that they didn't do what they were told. We'd had a lot of fire drills, and I remember one of my children one time stopped and picked up his coat, and our principal came in and said, "You don't even stop and pick up your coat!" When the fire bell went off, when the bomb went off, the children knew what to do. They knew they didn't stop to find

anything or to pick anything up. They knew they were to get out. So I think a lot of our fire drill exercises helped the children to escape and to leave.

Mark Junge: So when did you finally settle down?

Carol Peterson: There were a couple of my children I found that they were taken in an ambulance and the parents weren't there, so I went in the ambulance with the children. No—I followed the ambulance. I took my own car and I followed the ambulance. Went up to Star Valley so that the children that didn't have parents would have somebody there.

Mark Junge: Did they finally settle down a little bit?

Carol Peterson: Yes, I thought they were amazing. "I'm hurt,"—we're just going to take you to the hospital. It was interesting—after that, the next day, several of the children came to my home—many of my students came to my home to see that I was still okay. I thought that was interesting that it was important that I was still here.

Mark Junge: Did you see angels?

Carol Peterson: No, I didn't. The children said that they saw angels. Well, in fact, I had a little boy—and you may have heard this story, and I don't know whether this was my point of view—we did a writing experience every week and I wanted them to write about something that was really special that happened to them. They went on a family vacation—and he said, "Can I write about the bombing?" and I said, "Oh, Nathan! You don't want to write about that, do you?" and he said, "Yeah, I do." His mother was my aide, and she told me that at home they were looking at a photo album, and he was looking through it and he saw this lady and he said, "Mom! This is the lady that told me to move away from the square."

Mark Junge: I might as well ask you this too, now that you've gotten into that. Do you think, Carol, that this was a miracle? I mean, was there heavenly intervention in this?

Carol Peterson: Oh, I definitely think there was heavenly intervention or we wouldn't have gotten out of that room. I think that the fact that the music teacher got shot and the

.45 didn't go off, because that's what he shot his wife with. Is that a miracle? I think that when we think back on it there were so many miracles, a teacher not getting killed, and all of us getting out of there alive.

Mark Junge: Some people felt that their kids not being in school that day was a miracle.

Carol Peterson: Yes! I'm sure. And one teacher. There was a substitute teacher in the third grade that day. So the teacher wasn't in the room at that time. There was one lady to me that was the real hero. Her name was Verline Benyon. She was one of our aides. She read with the children that were having problems with their reading. She stayed in that room. She was probably in her late sixties. She said, "I'm old, I've lived my life." So she crawled around that room to see if there were any children that had been left. To me she was the hero. I thought that was incredible that she would do that.

Mark Junge: Where was the janitor during all this?

Carol Peterson: I understood that he was down in the kitchen working on some plumbing—I don't remember. We had a person who had come to interview for a position at the school. She was there. We had a UPS person.

Mark Junge: That's a lot of people crammed into a 27 by 27 room!

Carol Peterson: It's a lot of people!

Mark Junge: How come you didn't get sick?

Carol Peterson: Well, I guess I didn't have time to. I was too concerned about these little people looking up at me, you know: "Are we going to be okay?" Probably that consumed my mind.

Mark Junge: Carol, when you go to the afterlife, I think you're going to get a special recognition!

Carol Peterson: Oh! You would have done the same thing!

Mark Junge: You think?

Carol Peterson: Yes, I do think you would have. When you have these little precious children that you're supposed to take care of, you'd do the same thing.

Mark Junge: Well, yeah. Do you dream about it? Do you ever have déjà vu on this?

Carol Peterson: I did, earlier on. I've had a few experiences when I've maybe been in a store and I see a man come in that reminded me of him, and it just kind of gives me a start. But it isn't something that I dwell on. I don't think it's—I guess I just feel such gratitude to be alive that I haven't dwelt on it.

Mark Junge: Do you think that this experience was meant to be? Or do you just think it's an accident? Because a lot of people interpret this as being an incident in which there were miracles performed, and God intervened, and angels came down, and people saw angels, and I just wondered if you think this was meant to be, and we all had to go through this experience, or whether you think it was just one of those things?

Carol Peterson: I think it's one of those things. I think everybody has their free agency, and they make decisions. This is a decision of a man that was not a good decision and we had to suffer for it.

Mark Junge: Okay. So what's the significance of this event then?

Carol Peterson: The significance of it?

Mark Junge: Yeah, if it was just an occurrence, if it was just a crazy guy out there who did a crazy thing?

Carol Peterson: Well, I think a lot of us realized how precious life is. I think we realize that there certainly is a supreme being that is part of our lives that does affect us and makes us, hopefully, better people. More compassionate, more understanding, more grateful for what we have.

Mark Junge: Has it done that for you?

Carol Peterson: Oh, I'll say! Yes, it certainly has. And realize that a superior being does love us and care about us and—

Mark Junge: Has it made you a stronger person, or did it weaken you?

Carol Peterson: Oh, I think it made me stronger. When you think of what could have been and didn't happen, the Lord did intervene. We know that. I know, I was sitting up in the corner with my children, and I'm sure somebody's told you about the image that was on the wall?

Mark Junge: Right.

Carol Peterson: I thought, and even now I think was that image really there? And our fourth grade teacher has a picture of it in his album that he wrote up all these things. Because it was just such a different experience that things happen, that you think, "Is this really happening?"

Mark Junge: Has anything like this ever happened before in your life? Is this, like, THE event?

Carol Peterson: (Laughs) That's the event! And you just hope that you don't have to go through it again. When we went back to school again we were really nervous. I remember I used to work late at school. I would go to school and I would work a lot of times at night. I'd work 'till ten, eleven o'clock at night, preparing for the next day. I couldn't go back. I tried. I went in the front door—I'd usually go in the south door because my room was at that end. I went in the front door, because I needed to copy some papers, and when I got just about to the teacher's lounge where we copy papers, I heard the door close and it gave me a start. It was just one of these slow moving doors, but I just couldn't go in to work at night.

Mark Junge: Were you able to go back into the school after this happened?

Carol Peterson: Yes. We went in—they let all the children come in. They had torn up the carpet, but you could see her blood stain on the floor, and they left all the stuff that was in the bathroom from him shooting himself—they left it on the wall. There was matter and blood. One of the reasons—I guess the psychiatrists, I don't know, they said they wanted the children to see it to know that he wouldn't threaten them again, that he could never hurt them again.

Mark Junge: Interesting!

Carol Peterson: We had a lot of psychiatrists come in. I know one came in one day and asked me, “How are you doing?” I said, “I’m just doing fine, but I’m still afraid of that door.” It was the door that went into the little hallway that connected. I had a just kind of a chill every time I’d go past that door. And he said, “Well, just think of it like this. This is hallowed ground. This is where a miracle was performed.” And that really helped me. I didn’t get over it in a day, you know.

Mark Junge: What was the therapeutic thing that helped you get over this?

Carol Peterson: Well, I think just not dwelling on it and going forward. I think relying on the Lord and having the faith that we could overcome this.

Mark Junge: Does it bother you to go back over it, like now?

Carol Peterson: Sometimes it gets me a little emotional.

Mark Junge: Yeah. So there’s a scar there, yet. Yeah, okay. Was your life in any way changed by this incident? Or do you think that you are the same person you were before the incident?

Carol Peterson: I think I’m the same person that I was before. Just probably more grateful, and grateful for life. I don’t think it changed me. Maybe it should have!

Mark Junge: Well, living in Cokeville, this is a stable community, and you go back to living a stable lifestyle. How would you describe the Cokeville community?

Carol Peterson: Well, it was very supportive, because people were coming in—I had a steady stream of friends and students and people who came to see how I was, to check on me. There was just an outpouring of love, and we soon forget though, and we kind of get back to our old ways of being critical. But living in a small town, we kind of know what’s happening to everyone. There is a really genuine love and concern and caring for each other.

Mark Junge: Is that because the community is small, or because it’s LDS or—

Carol Peterson: I think it's both. We've had a lot of people come into our community who are not LDS that are just wonderful, kind, good people that I think have added, you know, the dimensions of the people and the type of people who live here.

Mark Junge: One of the things you said off-tape, you said that everybody had a different story. Is that true?

Carol Peterson: I think so. I have a sister-in-law who lives across—right on the corner up there. Her story is different than mine, because different people were in her life right at that moment and the area where she was, I couldn't tell you what was going on in the rest of the room.

Mark Junge: I'm amazed, reading *Witness to Miracles*, the book, that there is so much variation in the stories. I mean, when everyone was gathered in this one room, 27 by 27 feet, and yet there's all these different stories and perceptions.

Carol Peterson: You know, there was a film done, and I was so disappointed in it, because we have teachers that go beyond, that really go beyond their job to try to help these children. I was disappointed that in the film there wasn't a showing of the shepherding of the teachers. I think that's a really important thing in this story. That these people, they weren't only our students, but we loved them and we cared for them. Of course, most teachers do, I think, love their students.

Mark Junge: Well, yeah. But did the filmmakers question you about what happened?

Carol Peterson: Oh, yeah. We were all interviewed. They talked about it. But it didn't come out. They did a thing on *Unsolved Mysteries*, which was much more accurate and done much better, but they kind of made us look like a bunch of hicks—made us kind of look like a bunch of really dumb people. And Cokeville, I have to say, there is a lot more culture and refinement here than you might find in a lot of other small towns.

Mark Junge: Well, even David Young recognized that the kids were getting good educations here. And he knew that.

Carol Peterson: I think the influence of people that have lived before we came made a lot of difference in the culture of the town. Their appreciation of music—there's a great appreciation for music and the arts.

Mark Junge: Really! In little Cokeville?

Carol Peterson: Yes. We have one of the great Western artists that lived in Cokeville.

Mark Junge: Was her name Minerva Teichert?<sup>2</sup>

Carol Peterson: Minerva Teichert, uh huh. I have one of her paintings right in my entry way.

Mark Junge: An original?

Carol Peterson: Uh huh. I do. I have two of her original paintings.

Mark Junge: Good. Thank you.

### ***Conclusion of interview***

*This oral history was produced by the Wyoming State Archives for the Department of State Parks and Cultural Resources. It was produced by Sue Castaneda. The interviewer was Wyoming Historian Mark Junge. The entire project is funded by the Wyoming Cultural Trust Fund.*

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<sup>2</sup> **Minerva Bernetta Kohlhepp Teichert** (August 28, 1888 – May 3, 1976) was an American painter notable for her art depicting Western and Mormon subjects, including a collection of murals depicting scenes from the *Book of Mormon*. *Wikipedia*.